UK poet celebrates family, community — and rice

Rice
Poems
By Nikky Finney
Sister Vision
175 pp. $15.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY
M. CELESTE NICHOLS

From the time Nikky Finney gave us *On Wings Made of Gauze* in 1985, I have hungered for more from this poet.

Now, just as nature satisfies the basics, Finney, a creative writing professor at the University of Kentucky, supplies us with what we need and want.

Finney's *Rice* is more than an inspiring collection of 43 poems; it is a celebration of American tradition and culture.

Finney

Finney was born in Conway, S.C., on the Atlantic coast. It was no utopia; yet, South Carolina nurtured in her a passion for sustenance — family, community and rice: "From the early 1700s and years beyond . . . Black people were the major import, and rice, its most favored export."

In the 13 poems of "Heel-Toe," the first section, Finney has her readers longing for real men — men who treated women better than themselves; men who would pull "back the Valiant / all the way up to the house porch / so she wouldn't have far to walk." We yearn for the good fellows who "wouldn't yell out / a rolled down window / no matter how pretty the face / no matter how tight the skirt."

She tells of respectable men who respected women. And although she never calls them role models, they were. The men Finney writes of did exist.

The 14 poems comprise the second section, "Thresh." Some may be emotionally painful, but each one furnishes nurturing, delicate truth.

"Pluck," one of this section's most enticing poems, calls to mind the time when blacks were not allowed on TV. But when that barrier was broken and blacks not only appeared on TV but starred in their own shows, everyone called everyone else to tell them to turn on the tube. Everyone watched, no matter the message; they watched just because.

But now, Finney says: "What [she] did for *Dynomite* and *Julia* / *Good Times* and all the rest / [she] can't for Halle Queen of the Roots."

Why? Because "Slavery was no opera," and TV shows like Alex Haley's 1991 made-for-TV movie *Queen* are "no love story." The poet tells us that: "It isn't bravery that's required / to watch a television." She says: "Teach a child something forever." And she warns: "Before you watch anymore / love your eyes."

Finney works in such notables as astronaut Mae Jemison, poet Carolyn Rodgers and activist Winnie Mandela, then adds dashes of "greats" and "grands" and spices of brothers and uncles and cousins.

Finney talks about feet and hair and color just like we did . . . and do. She writes of our shock, our shame, our embarrassment, our disgust when Whoopie, "Enthroned . . . in the honor seat" asked, "Can't we take a joke" after having been roasted by her "fellow funny lover." Finney unearths the words we searched for deep within the soul and responds for us: "I can't take a joke but what I won't take is injury / disguised as laughter."

"Minnow," the last section, includes 16 poems that tell of being in love, of being loved, of being because of love. The educator, the homemaker, the lawyer, the janitor, the maid, the preacher, the deacon, the Sunday School teacher — Finney tells of our struggles, our strife, our survival, of love and continuing on.

Nikky Finney's special seasoning for *Rice* — although as she tells us, rice needs no garnish — are 10 special photographs. She does not provide captions for any of these valuables; we know that these are family treasures because they look so much like our own.

The more I read in *Rice*, the more I wanted to read, and the more I dreaded reaching the end. So, when I got to the last word, I went back to the beginning. I had a second helping of *Rice*. You will want one, too.

■ **M. Celeste Nichols** is an English professor at Bellarmine College in Louisville.